

FROM THE COUNTY SEAT

Eco Complex Builds ‘Synergy’

By Dave Hardin

Catawba County Government has been working for a couple of years on an innovative new project to combine continuing efforts to attract new business and industry with the importance of protecting our environment. It's called the Catawba County Eco Complex and it's based at the Blackburn Landfill. And I'm definitely allowed to call this an innovative project, because The Innovation Groups just gave the project its highest national award.

If you talk to Catawba County Director of Utilities and Engineering Barry Edwards about this project, he will frequently use the word "synergies". One definition of the word is "a mutually advantageous cooperation where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts." And that does sum up the Eco Complex pretty well. The Eco complex will use the synergetic relationships of its public and private partners for the benefit of the environment and the local economy.

Private companies have been recruited to co-locate their operations with those of the Blackburn Landfill. Waste products from those businesses will be converted into energy to operate the landfill, the partner businesses and a proposed sludge maintenance facility.

Some of the Eco Complex partners are already in place. Gregory Wood Products has been in operation since August 2005 and has 93 employees working six days a week. This company is a producer of dimensional lumber and it buys 5000 to 6000 tons of logs each week, adding \$9 to \$10 million a year to the local economy. Pallet One is another business that is expected to open inside the Eco Complex later this year. It will take the wood waste produced by Gregory Wood Products and turn it into wood pallets used by a host of industries.

Catawba Count is continuing negotiations with greenhouse companies interested in locating in the Eco Complex. Appalachian State University has received a grant for a biodiesel research facility that would be located in the Eco Complex and would use the electricity and heat created by the County's existing co-generation units, which use methane naturally produced in the landfill to generate electricity.

Further, Catawba County is currently reviewing Requests for Proposals from companies interested in constructed a bioenergy facility that would be located in the Eco Complex. This facility will convert the waste products of Gregory Wood Products, Pallet One and the landfill, (sawdust and other wood waste and methane and ethanol-based wastes), to produce steam and heat. That steam and heat would then be used by Gregory Wood Products and Pallet One for drying kilns, by the county to produce more electricity and for the proposed sludge maintenance facility, and could be used by the greenhouse and Appalachian State's biodiesel research facility.

Can you see the mutually beneficial relationships at work here, the "synergies" that make the Catawba County Eco Complex such an innovative idea? All this reuse of materials means the wastes aren't going back into the environment as any kind of pollutant.

The Innovation Group, which works to assist local governments in building and sustaining the capacity to be innovative, saw the synergies. They've given our Department of Utilities and Engineering their 2007 Thomas H. Muehlenbeck Award for Excellence in Local Government, for the Eco Complex work.

Recruiting new jobs to Catawba County and working to improve our environment are two separate, ongoing goals of the Board of Commissioners. The single project is doing much to meet both goals.